

- Report No. 89
- March-April 1990



Women: Bearing the Cross of Discipleship

Why this issue?

Three women come to mind: Mary, the woman who has lived a quiet and obedient life in the Mennonite church, raising her kids, supporting the church, and doing volunteer work; Ruth, the woman who has had a marriage of abuse, emotional and physical, who can no longer tolerate what it is doing to her and the kids but who cannot speak out in the church or initiate divorce because she fears that it is against God's will; and Sarah, the woman who feels tension with her Brethren tradition because she's not sure that they would sanction what she finds meaningful in her life.

Three women, all within the believers' church tradition. All hearing the message that the tradition is famous for—to love God is to love others, to love others is to give selflessly to them, denying yourself in all things. To be a true disciple, one is to lose one's life in order to gain it, take up one's cross and follow Jesus. To be obedient to the Christian life, one is to live a life of service, forsaking selfish desires and prideful ways.

How does this message sound to these three women? What do they hear? What are their life choices within this context? Is this message redemptive for them?

To Mary, giving her all to her family and her church, this message confirms and affirms her choices. Yes, she is to give her all. Yes, she is to daily seek to fulfill the family's needs, not her own. Yes, she is to put her time, her energy, her life at their disposal. The book *The Giving Tree* is the perfect story for this. Never mind that the young boy grows up to be a self-centered, tunnel-visioned man with no thought of anyone but of himself and his needs. Never mind that the tree (who is portrayed as female) dies in order to sustain the selfish need of the man. Isn't that what the Christian life is all about? Aren't we to die in order to know true life? She was a good example, she never sinned. Isn't that what being Christian is all about?

To Ruth, caught in an abusive marriage, the message causes intense pain and suffering. How? How is she to be servant to this one who abuses her and her children? How is she to turn the other cheek and resist not evil when the evil continues day in and day out? How is this helping anyone to know Christ, let alone the goodness of a Christian home? What are the children learning about God, about the church? Is the church supporting this kind of relationship? Does God want this for her?

To Sarah, who is in tension with the church, the question becomes, "Am I in or am I out?" She has found more support for her life from the psychological and sociological movements of the day which emphasize a reclaiming of the self, a seeking of her own identity. She has found herself rejoicing in her ability to choose, to decide, to make life choices because of who she is and the relationships that she wants to nurture. But growing in her is the sense that she is forsaking the believers' church tradition and seeking herself. Isn't this exactly the wrong way to go? Isn't she to be losing herself to others in order to find her way? How does her own search for herself square with all that she was taught and has believed in?

It was clear in the past, when life was stable in the village, when family life and work life overlapped, when men and women together bore both the economic and nurturing burdens of the family (when the children would spend the day with the father in the field or getting wood or water)—it was clearer then what it meant to serve the whole family, to lose your life in order to save it. Just as it was clearer that each gained in such a giving over of yourself. Today it is no longer clear.

Societally, the burden of serving the needs of the family has fallen upon the shoulders of just one in the family, the woman. And theologically, we have followed suit. We have said that it has been her duty to be for others, for their gain and not hers, and her duty alone. It is the woman who is to be the example of the good, Christian life. She is to be ever smiling and uncomplaining—the wife who bears all things, endures all things, cherishes all things. She is to be the mother who patiently waits through all the years of childrearing, giving herself to the daily toil of family needs. She is the one who is to work quietly in the Missionary Society or Ladies' Aid to raise money for the curtain in the pastor's study or silverware in the kitchen. She is the one to make sure that the church has been fed and clothed. As one woman shared with me, "Women are to be the Christian example of submission for the whole church. We know men are more prone to sin; it is up to us to make sure that the home is a good home and that the church raises its children well. It is up to us to give of ourselves in every way so that the true Christian life will be known, so that the church heritage will be preserved. It is up to us."

Women have born the cost of discipleship, we have walked the second mile, we have given up our coat and our mittens as well. We have become acquainted with grief and with sorrow. But we have not gained our life, we have found it squandered by those to whom we gave. And we have been told that we are wrong to seek it.

What now? What happens now as women begin the search for a call from God, a particular vocational call? Is this a selfish move? Are we stepping into sin as we seek to name for ourselves life goals? Are we stepping into sin as we announce a failed marriage to the world and place the responsibility for the failure on the husband? Are we really in the midst of the grace of God if living obediently and within community is but a habit born of years of smiling and enduring?

Throughout this issue we will be seeking our way through these various tensions and questions. The questions themselves may not be rightly stated. It could be that as we study the texts and stories we will find that there are ways to hear them that do not pose the problems as they are now posed. You will find that each writer will have her own way of stating the tension stemming from her own story.

For within the lives of many women within the believers' church tradition, the questions and tensions are real: How do I now live out of a sense of servanthood and service without losing myself, without sinning through the loss of

myself? How can we all bear the cross of discipleship, not just the women? What is the call to discipleship for today? How can we all enable women to respond to the call of God for their lives? They are questions each woman asks of herself; they are questions we must also ask as a church body. ●

—*Nadine Pence Frantz*

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"A sense of self apart from others is a prerequisite for true charity."

by Vange Thiessen

Serving with a Feminist Perspective

Service, in the name of Christ, is firmly woven into the fabric of my story. From within a traditional, Mennonite family living in rural Saskatchewan, serving others was seen to be an integral part of a simple, community lifestyle. In my mother I saw a warm, caring, self-sacrificing person. Over the years my ambivalence grew as I watched her struggle with feelings of low self-worth and fears of what others might think. At times the dissonance between my developing personhood and the patriarchal interpretations of servant theology was painfully evident. I entered adulthood with a desire for independence, strength to pursue career goals, regard for church participation, and values of mutuality in marriage such as shared parenting and joint economic responsibility. As I reflect on this, several factors seem significant in the process of my integration and empowerment.



1) **Perceiving that I am loved.** The ability to love others has its roots in an experience of being loved. I John 4:19, "We love others because God first loved us." The primary focus is not on loving others, nor on loving oneself, rather it is resting in the truth that God loved us first. Being the youngest of nine children, I entered a family where I was enjoyed, nurtured, and regarded—not a perfect environment, but certainly good enough. Secure attachments developed and to this day I value close, open relations with extended family and friends. As God's love is manifested through human relationships, we are enabled to love ourselves and others.

2) **Exercising a Gift of Creation—Choice.** Service as an outcome of desire and choice bears a quality of authenticity and integrity. A sense of self apart from others is a prerequisite for true charity. As women, we have two hurdles to overcome: differentiation from family of origin and from a religious community. Where values of loyalty, harmony, similarity, and control are fostered, the move towards autonomous decision-making requires courage. My parents, perhaps due to a readiness for retirement, facilitated the process of separation during my adolescence. I was given room to choose my friends, pursue my own interests and goals, and to speak up in church without reprimand! Now as an adult woman knowing my own wants and values, I can approach service with a sense of choice, feeling free to consider my needs as well as others.

3) **Embracing the Paradox of Jesus' Teaching.** Learning to let go is a painful process. Regardless of gender, the scriptures inform us that if we pursue life, we shall lose it. Trying to secure our own acceptance and approval, we endlessly seek to please, to sacrifice and to live out the expectations of others. But all is in vain! Unless we risk the abandonment of our hungry pursuits, we forfeit the experience of grace. When service is an attempt to fill, the pot runs dry. True life comes in admitting our emptiness and limitations. It is in God's fullness that we are empowered to serve—a paradox indeed!

Now at age 41, the threads of service continue through my pilgrimage. Knowing I am loved, and by actively choosing and embracing the paradox, I can fully live as a woman and offer my service with thanksgiving. ●

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"... the chief problem women have, even now, is that they have to be both Martha and Mary most of the time and these two modes of being are diametrically opposite." —May Sarton, in *House by the Sea*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York.

by Gayle Hunter Sheller

Two Sisters Talking...

There's so much to do to get ready for his coming...bread to bake, floors to scrub, a trip to the market. We must tell the neighbors, invite them for the evening. That means more fruit and bread. Then, there's the guest room to ready. He'll need quiet, rest. Flowers for his room. Oh... how will I get it all done?

He's coming. Tomorrow, finally. I've missed him, so long since we've talked. I have so much to tell him. Can I ever love him enough? He loves us so. Just to have him in our home, at our table, to have hours for his stories, to watch him, to feel his hope. I don't want to lose a single, precious moment.

Mary's off dreaming again. It's in her eyes. I'll have to remind her we have work to do or she'll spend the afternoon lost in her head. I suppose some will stay the night. Have I enough food? Maybe I'll ask a neighbor or two to bring extra wine. How many will be traveling with him this time? Now where's Mary gone to? She could at least have offered to do the marketing!

It will pass quickly, his time with us, as always. I wish the time away before he comes, then wish it to stop altogether once he's here. When he leaves, I fear we may never see him again. I have this sense he's in more danger than we know. Yet, it's a waste of time to worry while he's here, and Martha must spend more time with him. She misses so much, always so busy.

It is as I feared. Mary sits absorbed in his every word, no thought to my needs. She's no help at all. Doesn't she care about our guests? I can't possibly see to all their wants. I really need her help or I'll be in this kitchen all day. It's not fair. If the work were done, we could both visit. Maybe, if I ask, Jesus will tell her to help. She listens to him...



by Gayle Hunter Sheller

Claiming Mary

Much to my surprise, I believe I have been called away from a vocation focused on the creation and sustenance of community to the more solitary work of creative writing. I am choosing to live in the hope that what God wants of me is a joy-filled attention to the Spirit, whose presence is always a gift. Yet not all the teaching I have received from my Anabaptist tradition supports this criterion for servanthood. The milk of my Christian life are the parables of the ten talents, the widow's mite, the good Samaritan. But right on the heels of Luke's story of the Samaritan is a little story of two sisters, Martha and Mary, that I am hearing as a word to me.

The church is family to me and I care about its life. I am concerned with the many things the church is called by God to do. So I have understood Martha well, and have blushed with her, angry and confused, when Jesus chides her impatience with Mary, saying "The part Mary has chosen is best." What did Mary choose? To sit at Jesus' feet and receive. Passive words, those, when there is so much to be done in a world broken and dying.

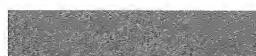
Discipleship as an anxious work that believes, "If I don't do it, no one will," or that complains, "Send my sister to the kitchen, Jesus; it's not fair I work alone!" is a kind of sacrifice no one wants. It is not an easy lesson for me, trained as I am to be mother, wife, pastor. Under each of those titles I have more than once said, "If I don't, who will?" and gritted my teeth to a joyless task, seething with self-righteousness. Such a Martha I am, trained with peripheral vision to see needs before they are expressed, eager to make life easier for others even at the expense of my own sanity. I know I am not alone in this one, having served churches kept alive by the dedicated, tireless work of women. Yet, inside every Martha is a Mary crying for life, a Mary who, if she were given some authority, some permission, might teach Martha what it means to respond to Jesus' invitation to receive.

In my own life, the lessons don't come easily, and I am not without questions. For most of forty years, my life has been inextricably bound to the life of the church, beginning as a pastor's daughter and leading to my own ordination. Then, through a series of steps that began with learning the discipline of silence and culminated in facing a chronic illness where I realized my life's very real limits, I heard a new call. I found my avocation, the writing which had sustained my spirit on the side, asking me to make a choice.

I was on retreat at a Benedictine monastery when I discovered my own freedom and a vision that my ministry might take a very different form. Doors opened for me, but not without grief attendant to closing other doors. I had been happy in my pastorate, liking much of my work, loving the deeply dedicated people who had called me out. But for far too long I had stifled my inner life, the part of my being that found home and creativity in solitude. I simply could not do it all. The limits were clear. I had to choose.

There are few models in Anabaptism for submission to solitude and silence while remaining in the world. I find helpful models in the Catholic monastic movement (Thomas Merton is one) and among Christian women writers (Madeleine L'Engle and May Sarton, to name two). I have to forge my own way of combining writing and being mother, wife and community member. I have my tinges of guilt, wondering if I should be "more active" a disciple than my writing permits. But then I grow quiet and know that, for this season, I am about my work. ●

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by Christina Bucher

Servanthood in Isaiah

Since the late nineteenth century, biblical scholars have singled out four passages in the book of Isaiah and identified them as "Servant Songs". Each of these four songs (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12) describes the activity of a figure called the "Servant of Yahweh." Because the poems themselves are ambiguous, much of the scholarly discussion of these passages has focused on the identity of the servant. In some places, they seem to refer to an unnamed individual, but, in other places, they identify the servant as the people of Israel.

Although it is not clear what the author of these poems intended or how they were heard by their first audience—the exiles in Babylonia, it is clear that the early Christians understood these passages to refer to Jesus. The evangelist Matthew, for example, explains Jesus' command to keep his healings a secret as a fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1-4. (See Matthew 12:15-21.)

For Christians in the Anabaptist tradition, it should not be difficult to read these poems from Isaiah and reflect on how it applies to Christian discipleship today. Christians in the Anabaptist tradition have long equated discipleship and servanthood. To live as a disciple of Christ is to take on the role of servant, to offer oneself in service to others.

Yet, Christian women today struggle with this definition of discipleship. Taking up the role of servant has led many women not to salvation, wholeness, and liberation, but to abuse, sickness, and self-abnegation. And, while not all women have interpreted servanthood to mean the total denial of the self, many women have failed to develop their full potential as persons and as Christian disciples because they have felt it wrong to put themselves forward.

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I recall a Bible study session in which a young woman talked about her discomfort when she interviewed for jobs. When asked by the interviewer to identify her strengths, she found herself unable to do so, even though she knew her unwillingness would likely cost her the job. When pressed by the group, she explained that she considered naming her strengths a sign of pride and, therefore, sinful.

In a book entitled *Beyond Servanthood: Christianity and the Liberation of Women* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), theologian Susan Nelson Dunfee argues that the theological concept of service has been a source of self-negation rather than self-empowerment for women. Because we have misunderstood the concept of service, Nelson Dunfee suggests we develop new language that will empower rather than limit women.

But before we abandon servanthood as a way of understanding Christian discipleship, we should re-examine the biblical context of this concept. When looking at the model of Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament, the Anabaptist tradition has tended to emphasize the suffering he experienced. Just as Jesus suffered, so must Jesus' disciples be willing to suffer. In fact, some Christians would say that suffering is essential to the Christian lifestyle.

When looking at the servant songs from an Anabaptist perspective, we might be tempted to focus on the suffering and humiliation of the servant. Yet although all four songs play with the contrast of humiliation and exaltation of suffering and triumph, they do not define servanthood as suffering.

Let us turn to Isaiah 42:1-4 where a prophet speaks of servanthood in proclaiming God's message:

Here is my servant! I will support her.
My chosen one! I delight in her.
I have put my Spirit upon her.
She will bring forth justice to the nations.
She will not cry out or lift up her voice.
She will not be heard in the streets.
She will not break a crushed reed,
Or quench a dimly burning wick.
She will faithfully bring forth justice.
She will not be quenched or crushed,
Until she has established justice in the earth,
and the coastlands wait for her instruction. (author's paraphrase)

In this first servant song, we notice that God presents the servant with the stamp of divine approval. God refers to

the servant as "my chosen one." God delights in her. In choosing her as servant, God has honored her. Yet, the poem says that the servant works quietly, unobtrusively. Does this mean that God honors her because she is humble? Does this mean that only those persons who refuse to put themselves forward can become God's servants?

When we look at the historical context in which this prophetic message was first pronounced we discover that the Israelite people at that time were experiencing humiliation and suffering. Living in exile in Babylonia, the people felt discouraged. Some felt that God had abandoned them. To these people the prophet says, "You may appear humiliated to the world, but God has chosen you for a special task."

This servant song plays with the paradox of how someone who does not have position of honor or power will be able to accomplish God's will. It does not praise the servant because the servant is humble, but rather, it marvels that someone who lacks power, at least by worldly standards, can achieve so much. The song, then, does not lead us to promote humility as a job qualification for the role of servant. Instead, the poem encourages all those persons who feel they lack talent to recognize the special gifts they have. The servant succeeds at her task despite not being born in the proper family or educated at the best university; she succeeds at her task because God chooses to empower her with the divine spirit.

One of the best-known servants of God, Moses, tried to turn down the job he was offered. Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah tried to refuse God's call to service because he



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felt he was not mature enough for the task. In fact, throughout the Bible we find that God chooses to work through persons whom the world ignores. And by choosing them, God thereby grants them the status that has not been theirs according to world standards. For example, in the Magnificat, Mary praises God because "he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48).



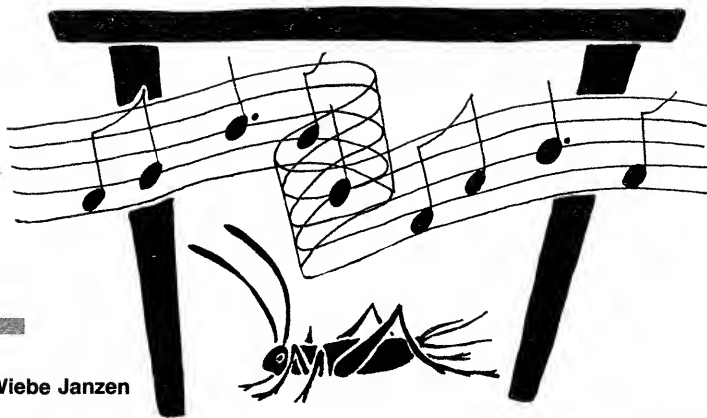
Servanthood is not blessed by God because of the suffering; a servant is blessed and used by God despite their humiliated status in the eyes of the world. The message of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, has to do with salvation and wholeness, with redemption despite one's situation, not with suffering and defeat. We in the Anabaptist tradition, however, tend to view suffering as an end result. We have made it into a kind of badge of honor, so that if you are not feeling humbled by your situation, you think you must be doing something wrong.

Although the servant in the song from Isaiah acts quietly, her work has worldwide implications. Recognizing ourselves as servants, we are called by God to not accept that worldly limitation. We are not to continue to hide ourselves under bushel baskets or modestly deny our work.

As servants of God we are freed from being bound by worldly evaluations of who has God's power and authority. We recognize that God empowers us to work with authority, regardless of worldly standards. Servanthood calls us to throw off that which limits and confines us. It frees us to act. It calls us to wholeness, to the fullness of life. And, it leads us to live boldly and confidently, to accept our chosenness, to believe that God delights in us.

God has called us to serve.
 God has grasped hold of us and chosen us.
 God has empowered us with the divine spirit.
 Let us act faithfully as the servants of God
 to bring forth justice in the world. ●

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by Jean Wiebe Janzen

Singing Yourself to Death

From behind the library table
the cricket chants
his measured mating song,
and then you at the piano,
as if in answer.
Beethoven, I think,
with its insistence.
Not to be outdone,
the cricket shrills above
the pianissimo, holding forth
against the simultaneous
shimmering tones.
But at the grandest chords
his voice is drowned
and soon forgotten.
Finished with the journey
of themes and recapitulations,
you close the book
and there he is at your feet
on his back, legs flailing
in desperation or a last ecstasy,
dying with the old unsolved riddle
under this giant music maker
for whom he gave his best music,
for whom it would never
be good enough.

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by Virginia Wiles Holsey

Philippians 2:5-11: A Paeon to Submission or a Call for Confidence?

"Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, emptied himself, took on the form of a servant and humbled himself..."

Throughout the history of Christianity this text in Paul's letter to the Philippians has been invoked as the supreme example of the humility and submission that should characterize the Christian life. From the early desert ascetics, to the medieval monks and nuns, to the early Anabaptists, this early Christian hymn about Christ has motivated the simple, submissive life of individual Christians and communities of believers. Indeed, the model of Christ in the hymn—going from the highest identification with God and humbling himself as a slave, even unto death—speaks of the power of submission and humility. Christ's actions reveal a vision of life that goes beyond the limits of self. A vision that life consists in more than security, that personal identity and freedom are found not through grasping but through giving.

But what are we as women to make of this hymn? We have heard and practiced the message of this hymn since birth. In many cases we as women have exemplified the message of humility that the hymn renders. As wives and mothers, as faithful servants of the church, we have in many ways incarnated the hymn for our brothers and our fathers. And, indeed, we have discovered that life is empowered by giving; submission can lead to joy.

Many of us would also, however, confess that submission and humility lead to death. For often we have submitted our lives away—sacrificed personal identity, confidence, and call so that others might grasp at life. We have humbled ourselves into near non-existence. We have become merely a shadow of ourselves, trapped in a giving-away that has exhausted all joy. We have “emptied ourselves” and bear the weighty cross that our brothers, or our mothers, or our own conscience has heaved onto our shoulders.



We know the value of humility. But we also know that the practice and internalization of humility as an end in itself often leads to a deep sense of worthlessness. We feel stupid, incompetent, and unconfident. Recently, in a class of college freshman, I asked the students, “How many of you say to yourselves with some frequency, ‘I’m so stupid.’” Not surprisingly, all of the women raised their hands; only about one-fourth of the men raised theirs. It is so often the story of women—societally-reinforced submission has led to an inescapable sense of inferiority; humility has denied us all claim to confidence, even confidence in the Lord.

And so the hymn apparently speaks only death to us. Like Christ, we have **not** grasped at equality. We have emptied ourselves. And so we have died.

Therefore!! God has highly exalted him,
and given him the name which is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow—in heaven, and on earth,
and under the earth,
and every tongue confess,
JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!
to the Glory of God.

Wait! This is a part of the hymn that we have not heard. The church has taught us the example of Christ—humility and submission unto death. But the church has failed to finish the hymn. We do follow Christ to death. Do we follow Christ through to exaltation? Heavens, no! Indeed, in many of the commentaries on Philippians 2:5-11, the commentators insist that the ethical exhortation of the hymn ends at verse 8—“even to death on a cross.” Only Christ experiences exaltation; we are not to follow him in exaltation. We are to remain slaves—obedient servants to the obedient one who has been pronounced “Lord.”

Did Paul mean this? Did Paul intend the Philippians to stop at verse eight in their following of Christ? To be sure, in Philippians 2:2-4 Paul has called for humility and concern for others. But in the wider context of the letter, Paul’s concern for the Philippians is their lack of confidence. “Stand firm,” he says in 1:27. In 1:28, “Don’t be frightened by anything.” Paul’s own concluding work to the Christ-hymn is “Work out your **own** salvation.” Paul is, in effect, cheerleading for the Philippians. He’s saying, “You can do it!”

The Philippians were facing conflict, perhaps even persecution (see 1:28-30). They were frightened, especially in Paul’s absence. Paul has been their confidence, their link to the strength of Christ. And now Paul himself was in prison. They feared for his life and thus feared for their own ability to go on. But Paul responded, “No! I am not your confidence. Whether I am with you or away (1:27) you will be able to stand firm. **You** are competent and able to work out your own salvation. You have Christ!”

At first glance it appears almost a heretical thing for Paul to say. We know that salvation is by grace, not by works. Only through faith (submission!) can one experience salvation. But is this not the story that the hymn tells? If we follow the hymn from beginning to end, not stopping at verse eight, the hymn says precisely that. Christ humbled himself and suffered; Christ was exalted—by God’s grace! Indeed, salvation has come through submission. The story does not end in suffering; it ends in exaltation.

Paul’s call to the Philippians, then, finds its power in verses 9-11 of the hymn. It is the exaltation scene to which Paul points. **This** is the confidence of the Philippians. **This** is the reason that Paul can call his friends to “work out your own salvation.” Like many women today, the Christians at Philippi already knew verses 6-8 of the hymn. They were suffering the results of their own decision to follow in Christ’s way, and they were no doubt suffering unjustly.

"We have followed Christ in his humility, let us follow Christ into the exaltation of the new realm."



They had emptied themselves and now found themselves fearing death. The "mind of Christ" that Paul called for was **not**, for the Philippians, the mind of humility, submission, and death of self. The "mind of Christ" was the mind of the Exalted Lord. This mindset is what will give the Philippians confidence in the face of fear, strength in the face of suffering, unity in the face of conflict. Jesus Christ is Lord! Suffering is not the end of the story. The goal is not submission, but rather the new realm established in Christ Jesus—a realm of glory, power, and identity as God's people.

What would it be like today to live in this new realm? What would it be like for women to live in this new realm of confidence, strength, and identity? Many of us have, like Christ, voluntarily submitted ourselves to our families, to the church, to God. And in this world—the realm of violence and abuse—it has, indeed, led to our death. We have experienced the death of confidence, the death of ourselves, the death of hope. For the world has turned our submission into dependence and our humility into passivity. But Paul calls us to a new realm—a realm where the submissive one is Lord.

For those of us who suffer at the end of verse eight—obedient unto death—Paul would say to us, "Read on! Claim your confidence! In Christ you are worth everything and can do anything!" (see Phil. 4:13). We need not fear that pride and power will take over, for we are not likely to forget the practice of humility. But now we must take courage and claim the strength and confidence that comes in the new realm. Christ did not disdain the new name of power and knowledge given him. We have followed Christ in his humility; let us follow Christ into the exaltation of the new realm. Stand firm. Don't be frightened by anything. Confidently work out your own salvation. For Jesus Christ, the one who submitted himself, is now Lord! ●

Virginia Wiles Holsey is visiting instructor of religious studies at St. Joseph's College in Philadelphia and is completing a doctorate in New Testament from the University of Chicago, Divinity School.

by Jane Flora Swick

Losing Your Life To Gain It

I was born on October 27, 1954, my Great-Aunt Ella Ebbert's birthday. For most of her life Aunt Ella was a Church of the Brethren missionary in India. Her work in India was centered in teaching and administration in girl's schools. Aunt Ella never married. I am the carrier of her story, her legacy for the family.

I was born into a Church of the Brethren family. All the resources of home, church and community nurtured me to be a "good Brethren girl." This meant "love one another" (i.e. never disagree with someone), "turn the other cheek" (i.e., keep silent when you are wronged), "NEVER get angry" (i.e., don't let anyone know you are angry), serve your neighbor, give up your life for others and ALWAYS be nice! Good Brethren girls always grew up to have children and be a wife.

In playing the children's game of "what do you want to be when you grow up," I regularly oscillated between being a missionary and being a mother. As a teenager these two desires were in conflict. I began to sense that I did not fit in the "good Brethren girl" mold. It seemed impossible to choose to be a missionary and yet somehow wrong to choose marriage. To serve the church was in conflict with family. Neither was wrong and neither was right.

I often agonized to God, "why can't I be like other women?"—meaning, why can't marriage and children be my number one priority, all consuming and where I find my identity. Each time I tried to live toward that vision I

"When the church requires women to give up their being for a man, for community relationships or for a god, we have missed the beauty and awesome wonder of God's image manifested in women."

could not live with the anxiety in my gut that said, "no." For deep within me, what I have come to believe was woven into me "in my mother's womb" was a restless longing to be carefree, loving, building, self-reliant, woman. It is this part of me that was required to be given up for husband, family, relationship.



Finally, through crisis and pain, I let go of this conflict to hear again who God was calling me to be. I was able to acknowledge the call of God to be "who I was:" builder, pastor, leader, God's daughter, loved, called, redeemed.

Redemption took place in the form of grace moments: in utter silence, abandoned by all relationships hearing the still small voice of God, "you are created in my image"; in the wide open space of prairie being filled with the wonder of God's creation that is bigger than me, but included me; in the touch of a hand during communion; in friends saying "you are my friend" not because of what I've done for them but because I am who I am; in a phone call asking me to write this article reminding me of my story that needs to be shared.

There are still battles. Some women and men don't understand my call. They find me a threat and their defensiveness continues to tear at me. But in prayer and in solitude I continually hear myself called out to ministry, to share my story: God loves me, God loves women. God calls me, God calls women to be their whole selves, to be in the image of God.

I don't consider myself a feminist. I am a person, God-given, created in God's image, gifted to receive without calculation of payback; giving without being consumed; gifting others without losing my sense of self; crying with and for others

without being lost in their pain; serving without deriving my identity from the deed.

The life I lose in order to gain it is the life of others' expectations. The life I gain is the living into God's life, into God's image, rather than an annihilation of myself. Living into God's life is freeing, fun and loving. It is finding my personhood in hearing Jesus call me by name as he did Mary's outside the tomb on that first Easter morning. When the church requires women to give up their being for a man, for community relationships, or for a god, we have missed the beauty and awesome wonder of God's image manifested in women. ●

Jane Flora Swick is pastor of the Eel River Church of the Brethren in Indiana.

• *Beth Gingrich* was ordained to chaplaincy at Calvary Hospital, an advanced cancer care facility in the Bronx, New York City. She attends North Bronx Mennonite Church. A member of Southside Mennonite in Elkhart, Ind., she was ordained by the Indiana-Michigan Conference.

• The first female chairperson of a provincial MCC



by Jean Wiebe Janzen

The Clarity of Dirt

A woman sits by late lamplight
planting violets on bonnets
with her needle. Today she pressed
sheets and pillowcases, white

with roses on the borders. Soon
the harvesters will come in.
Too exhausted to wash,
they will lie down on those

linens, the dirt making prints
of their bodies. And they
will dream with a certain clarity.
Like the blind man with mud

on his eyes, they will see trees
walking like men. They will
rise up to meet them, lifting
their loads easily, as in

a dance. And she will dream
that the meadow has come into
her house, that she is floating
on it, her children running

freely with muddy feet
over her sheeted body. All of them
in this night-darkened house
knowing in their sleep
why they are here, what they
were meant to be.

by Dorothy Jean Weaver

So You Shall Purge The Evil From The Midst Of You: Reflections on Deuteronomy 19:16-21 and Matthew 5:38-42

Without question one of the most difficult sayings of Jesus is the saying found in Matthew 5:38-42 in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said:

An eye for an eye
and a tooth for a tooth.

But I say to you:

Do not resist the evil person.

But if anyone strikes you on your right cheek,
turn to him the other cheek as well.

And to the one who wishes to sue you and to take
your tunic,
offer your cloak as well.

And if anyone compels you to carry his burdens one
mile,
go with him two miles.

Give

to the one who asks of you.

And do not turn away
the one who wishes to borrow from you. (author's
translation)

organization was elected in Alberta in November. *Anne Harder* of Winterburn, Alta., a member of Edmonton's First Mennonite Church, succeeds out-going chairperson Gerhard Bartel.

• *Katie Funk Wiebe* has been appointed editor of *Rejoice!*, the inter-Mennonite devotional magazine. She will begin the part-time assignment April 1, 1990. She replaces Don Ratzlaff.

• *Susan Goering*, Baltimore, was recently appointed chairperson of MCC U.S. Peace Section. She is the representative from the General Conference's Commission on Home Ministries.

• *Jan Steckley* has begun as associate pastor at Breslau (Ont.) Mennonite Church. She and her husband, Jeff, had been associate pastors at Steinmann (Ont.) Church.

• *Karen Kurtz* became director of sponsored programs at Goshen College in January. She is a grants writer who supervises the grants management/stewardship process for funded projects through foundations and federal agencies. Previously she worked as assistant director of information services.

"Do not resist the evil person." This saying is troubling at the best of times and places. And when we begin to ask what this saying means for those within society who are powerless and oppressed, Jesus' words become an outright offense to our sensibilities. What is Jesus' word to those women who know first hand the meaning of physical or emotional abuse? What is Jesus' word to those women who have found themselves trapped by societal structures and social customs which codify injustice and make it appear respectable? Is this saying of Jesus in any way "good news" for women? Unless we are prepared to declare the words of Jesus irrelevant to the world in which we live, this is the question which faces us.

Our search for an answer must start with the law that is cited in verse 38, the law of retaliation itself. We cannot fully understand Jesus' words unless we understand what Jesus is challenging. Deuteronomy 19:16-21 provides us with the closest Old Testament parallel to the saying found here.²

If a malicious witness rises against any man to accuse him of wrongdoing,
then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord,
before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days.

The judges shall inquire diligently.

And if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely,
then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother.

So you shall purge the evil from the midst of you.
And the rest shall hear and fear
and shall never again commit any such evil among you.

Your eye shall not pity:
It shall be life for life,
eye for eye,
tooth for tooth,
hand for hand,
foot for foot. (RSV)

This is the law of retaliation, the law which Jesus challenges. And when we look at this law we can begin to see what is at stake in Matthew 5:38-42. First of all, the law which Jesus challenges is fundamentally re-active in nature. In any given situation the response of the Israelite community to the offender is defined by the evil intentions of that offender: "Then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother . . . Your eye shall not pity: It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." Here there is no need for wisdom,

no call for initiative and no room for mercy. Punishment simply follows intended harm in an inevitable, mechanistic, fashion. Action dictates reaction.

And that is not all; the law which Jesus challenges is not only a re-active law but ultimately a **death-dealing** law as well. This is one of a series of laws from Deuteronomy which conclude with the formula, "So you shall purge the evil from the midst of you."³ According to Deuteronomy these laws represent the basic response of the Israelite community to "the evil in their midst." But what is most striking about these laws as a group is that all of them have to do with capital crimes—crimes for which the punishment is death. So as Deuteronomy portrays it, the Israelite method for "purging the evil from [their] midst" is to **execute the evildoers**. Deuteronomy 19:16-21 is, then, the call to exact "life for life."

Against this backdrop the words of Jesus from Matthew 5:38-42 stand forth in bold relief. The issue is still the same one: The response of the community to the evil person. But here all parallels end. Jesus' method for purging the evil person, is one which stands the law of retaliation completely on its head.

Where the law of retaliation demanded a point for point re-action to the offender ("life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot"), Jesus now calls for a new type of response: "Turn the other cheek; offer your cloak; go two miles; give; do not turn away." Jesus' call in these verses is clearly **not a call to re-action** but rather a **call to take the initiative**. In contrast to the law of retaliation there is nothing at all self-evident about these responses. They are by no means likely or logical human responses to the actions in question. In fact what is most striking here is that these actions completely defy all natural instincts.⁴ This is an extraordinary approach to dealing with the evil person.

But it is right at this point that the **good news** of Jesus' saying begins. In its own paradoxical way this extraordinary call for initiative in place of re-action stands as a **word of empowerment**. As long as the community is bound to the rule that action dictates re-action, it is the evil person alone who retains the power to act. The community has no other option than to re-act, in a dreary and never-ending cycle, to the initiatives of the evil person. By contrast, Jesus' challenge to his disciples breaks this dismal cycle and hands initiative and responsibility back to the community. Jesus' call "not to resist the evil person" is in actuality a **call which empowers the community to action**.

What is the nature of that action? One thing is clear above all else. The action for which Jesus empowers his disciples in this saying is **life-affirming action**. This can be seen in the contrast which Jesus sets up: "You have heard that it was said....; but I say to you." Jesus' words pose a direct challenge to the law of retaliation with its ultimate demand of "life for life." Here again is **good news**. Not only does Jesus hand initiative back to his disciples and empower them for action, more significantly, Jesus calls the community to **actions which affirm life rather than demanding death**.

This, then, is Jesus' response to the law of retaliation and Jesus' method for "purging the evil person." It does not answer all our questions about what to do. The words of Jesus seldom do. Nor does it offer us any assurances about positive outcomes. Jesus seldom makes such assurances. This word of Jesus is a strong and open-ended call to discipleship, a call which answers few questions and offers no assurances. As such, this word will always offend our sensibilities. The scandal of this saying can never be smoothed over.

At the same time this word of Jesus in Matthew 5:38-42 is a strong word of empowerment for those who are powerless. It is the extraordinary challenge to "purge the evil from our midst" through life-affirming actions which take the initiative away from the evil doer. It is the word which restores to the community the power to act redemptively for life in the face of an evil situation. As such, this word is indeed a word of **good news** for women, for men, for all disciples of Jesus Christ. ●

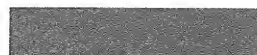
Dorothy Jean Weaver teaches New Testament at Eastern Mennonite Seminary and is a member of the Community Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Va.

¹ Other versions of this "word from the Lord" are found in Luke 6:27-36, Romans 12:14-21 and I Peter 3:8-12. See also I Corinthians 6:1-8.

² See Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), pp. 219-220. Other versions of the law of retaliation are found in Exodus 21:22-24 and Leviticus 24:10-23.

³ Deuteronomy 17:2-7; 17:8-13; 19:16-21; 21:1-9; 21:18-21; 22:13-21; 22:22; 22:23-24; 24:7. The exact wording of the formula differs slightly from text to text, but the idea of "purging evil/guilt from the midst of you" is prominent throughout.

⁴ See Robert C. Tannehill, *The Word of His Mouth: Forceful and Imaginative Language in Synoptic Sayings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 67-77.



Letters

We encourage and invite letters from readers that speak to the issues raised and the perspectives presented in Report. Although we try to print all letters, some may be shortened or edited to fit available space. All letters must be signed, although writers may request to have their names withheld.

- This morning I received your issue focusing on Women Around the World: What are Their Options? (No. 87). Excellent publication!

I wish to correct an error in the same issue. Loris Habegger as interim pastor in our church in Goessel, Kan. and not Lois Habegger. He did an outstanding job of communicating to us and ministering to our congregation.

Thank you for informing us of what is happening on some very current issues.

—Marlene Schroeder, Newton Kan.



News and Verbs

• Spring House Cleaning

It's tempting to send a newsletter to people forever. But in the interest of saving resources, we have decided to join in "spring cleaning" of several MCC newsletters.

In May North American readers will receive a letter and postcard from MCC asking if they want to continue receiving *Women's Concerns Report*. If your copy collects dust or goes into a recycling bin unread, then ignore the May letter and postcard. Your name will be taken off our mailing list. If you want to continue receiving *Women's Concerns Report*, mark it on the postcard and send it back to us. We are asking all our readers, new and old, to do this.

Watch for the May letter and postcard. Until then, enjoy *Women's Concerns Report*.

- A Mennonite attorney takes his infant son to work with him in Washington, D.C., and that caught the attention of *Washington Post Magazine*. Featured in a recent issue were Philip Baker-Shenk and his five-month-old son Jesse, who has accompanied him to the office several days a week since the infant was three weeks old. Baker-Shenk's schedule is more flexible than that of his wife, Charlotte. "I can be a lawyer the rest of my life, but I can only be a dad like this for a little while," he says. Baker-Shenk works for a law firm that represents several American Indian tribes.
- Church World Service is currently engaged in a large housing program in Bangladesh, a country marred by Muslim cultural bias against women. CWS is building or rehabilitating more than 10,000 homes and has specified that **95 percent of the jobs created will go to women** and that the new homes will be put in the names of wives, not husbands. Said a CWS official, "We expect it will create conflict, but it will be worth it."
- In Australia, church workers are warning about **mother bashing**. *The Advertiser* newspaper reports that according to church and social workers in the Australian state of South Australia, "an alarming number of women are being beaten up by their teenage children."
- **Strength, Struggle, and Solidarity: India's Women** is a 100-page Pinchpenny Press (Goshen College) book written by Dorothy Yoder Nyce. She reports that the second reprint of the book has been done and is available from her for \$3.50 postpaid at: 1603 S. 15th St., Goshen, IN 46526. Limited copies of **Weaving Wisdom: Sermons by Mennonite Women**, edited by Dorothy Yoder Nyce in 1983, are also available for \$5.00.
- The Goshen College Communication Department seeks a **professor of speech communication** on less than full-time basis. Requirements include a master's degree in speech communication, professional experience in speech or teaching, and a commitment to Christian values as interpreted by the Mennonite Church. Women and members of ethnic minority groups are especially encouraged to apply. Send letter of application, graduate transcript(s), curriculum vitae, and the names of three references to Stuart W. Showalter, chair and professor, Communication Dept., Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526.
- In Natal, South Africa, the "**Movement for the Ordination of Women**" in the Anglican Church held its first public demonstration recently. The demonstration, described by



Easter Blessing

May the God who shakes heaven and earth, whom death could not contain, who lives to disturb and heal us, bless you with power to go forth and proclaim the gospel. Amen.



Bishop Michael Nuttall as "a friendly action," occurred at the annual ordination of priests. Many of the congregation wore yellow daisies as a mark of solidarity with the call to ordain women to the priesthood. The Province of Southern Africa of the Anglican Church has been involved in a debate over the ordination of women to the priesthood since 1968.

- **Ontario Women in Mission has joined the campaign against war toys.** Letters have been sent to Canadian war toy manufacturers expressing concern and urging them to develop new lines of toys and games.

- **Athletes for Equality**, an organization founded to address the question of **sexist media coverage of women's sports**, has sent a petition to *Sports Illustrated*, asking that they discontinue the "swimsuit" issue. The organization is also conducting a letter-writing campaign to corporations which advertise in the issue, asking them to withhold sponsorship. Petitioners feel strongly that the swimsuit issue has nothing to do with athletics and is pornographic in intent and therefore extremely sexist and insulting to women.

- **An experience for exploration of call and gifts: Wellspring Orientation**, at Wellspring Retreat Center, Church of the Saviour, Washington, D.C. For information about this four-day retreat held several times a year at Wellspring, write to Wellspring-Church of the Saviour, 11411 Neelsville Church Road, Germantown, MD 20874.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in *REPORT* do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT edited by Christine Wenger Nofsinger. Layout by Shirley Stauffer Redekop. Correspondence and address changes should be sent to Chris Nofsinger, Editor, MCC, PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

U.S. residents may send subscriptions to the above address. Canadian residents may send subscriptions to MCC Canada, 50 Kent Avenue, Kitchener, ON N2G 3R1. A donation of \$10.00 per year per subscription is suggested.

This newsletter is printed on recycled paper.



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